Seven things we learned from 50 years of The Wicker Man

Fifty years on from its release, The Wicker Man is still one of the most beloved British horror films. A sinister tale of a police officer (Edward Woodward) investigating the disappearance of a girl in a strange pagan community in the Scottish isles, Robin Hardy's classic 1973 movie has lost none of its unsettling power and frequently appears on lists of the best films ever made.

BBC Radio 4 Extra celebrated its anniversary with an evening of dedicated programmes called The World of The Wicker Man, which included new interviews with one of its cast, Lesley Mackie, who played Daisy, and archive recordings of its other cast members. Here are seven things we learned about a film once dubbed "the Citizen Kane of horror movies".

Listen to more from The World of The Wicker Man on BBC Sounds

1. Christopher Lee thought the film could have been even better

The late Christopher Lee, who played Lord Summerisle, the head of the pagan cult, once called The Wicker Man "the best film I've ever done". However, in an interview on Saturday Classics on Radio 3 in 2013 he revealed that he thought it could have been far better if it had been a lot longer.

"It has been completely butchered; it's not the film we made," he says. "When I first saw it, I went to the writer Anthony Shaffer, the director Robin Hardy and the producer Peter Snell and said, 'This version I've just seen, there's so much missing. Not just me but many other characters. It's a wonderful film… but it's not the film we made.' There's so much missing – witty, frightening, funny, brilliantly written."

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>
> *Christopher Lee*

2. The filming was suitably eccentric

Lesley Mackie, who plays schoolgirl Daisy Pringle, remembers the shoot as "quite chaotic". She was a recent drama school graduate when she got the role, despite playing a child, and recalls: "I was aware that things were very unusual."

She arrived on her first day to a rather surprising welcome. "I was told, 'You were supposed to be in the scene yesterday where the girls were dancing naked'," she says with some alarm. "I'd never been told about that at all. I was very relieved I hadn't turned up the day before!"

3. Mackie feared the film's famously lost footage was her fault

The released cut of The Wicker Man, acclaimed as it was, is not the one Robin Hardy intended. His original cut lasted around 100 minutes but was cut to around 88 minutes for release.

Although there have been several cuts since, restoring cut scenes, some of Hardy's original footage has been mysteriously lost. There has long been a story that the footage is somewhere buried under a motorway, but Lesley Mackie use to fear there was another explanation.

"I used to wonder if I had anything to do with it," she says, recalling a time she was entrusted with the film's rushes (the footage filmed that week). "I was going down to London and they said: 'Could you take the footage from the week?' They gave me the rushes and said: 'It's worth £15,000 and your scenes are in it.'" Mackie took it back to London and handed it over as instructed, but when news of missing footage materialised, she began to wonder… "I thought, 'Oh I hope I gave it to the right person!'"

4. Britt Ekland was disappointed with her bottom

Britt Ekland's nude scene as Willow, the landlord's daughter, in The Wicker Man is one of the most notorious in cinema, mainly for its famous use of a body double.

Ekland agreed to appear topless in a scene of her dancing naked, but the role of her bottom was played by someone else. Ekland was in London at the doctor's, discovering she was three months pregnant, when her double's scenes were shot. When she saw the footage, she was not pleased with her imposter posterior. As she told BBC Radio 4's Loose Ends in 2020: "It was apparently an unknown stripper. But excuse me, her bottom is not really as nice as mine."

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5. Everyone was freezing cold

The film is set in springtime, with nature bursting into life and warm sun glowing. Filming in fact took place in October and November 1972. Lesley Mackie remembers that shooting her role took much longer than planned because of the terrible weather.

"It should have taken a few hours, but it took a few days because the weather was so bad," she laughs. "It was all set around May Day and they were having to transport all these floral things in to give the effect of spring. It was meant to be May 1st and everybody was frozen and having to skip about in pretty frocks!"

6. Mackie tried to teach Britt Ekland a Scottish accent

Ekland, who is Swedish, had both her speaking and singing voice dubbed in the film (by Annie Ross and Rachel Verney, respectively) in order to give Willow a Scottish accent.

There were attempts to help Ekland do her own dialogue, with Mackie asked to give her some tutoring. "It was no fault on her part or mine, but there was no way anyone could have taught a Swedish lady to do a Scottish accent," says Mackie. "I think that she always hoped it would be her voice."

Mackie says she doesn't understand why Robin Hardy didn't just let Ekland use her own accent. "I'm puzzled they didn't let her use it," she says. "It was a very Wicker world. There were different accents all over the place."

7. The film's success is down to Christopher Lee and Robin Hardy

The Wicker Man was well reviewed on release, but only a modest commercial success. Lesley Mackie credits its endurance to the work of Christopher Lee and Robin Hardy. "It was a personal quest of Christopher Lee and Robin Hardy, I think," she says. "They were travelling everywhere, losing a lot of money at their own expense. I think Robin Hardy got into grave financial problems because of it. They really, really believed in it."

The Wicker Man went on to be re-released multiple times and still appears on lists of the best films ever made.

You can hear the interviews with Lesley Mackie in full on BBC Sounds here.

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